Destination: Love

Posted on **May 4, 2013** by **kristy**

a personal commentary on Civil Unions by Kristy Milligan, Executive Director

If you ask anyone who knows me well, they'll tell you. I cry at weddings. Big weddings, small weddings, family weddings, friend weddings, weddings of people I hardly know. It doesn't matter. I cry.

Naturally then, I expected some tears and sniffles at this week's local Civil Unions

celebration, and sniffle I did. But as I walked through the blustery evening to my car and sat down, something completely unexpected happened. I sobbed. Inconsolably.

The "usual" amount of tears sprouts from a deep sense of humility and honor at being included in the ceremony that unites two people. The sniffles ensue because in the moment that two people commit their lives to one another, it becomes impossible to ignore the buoyancy of hope and of the human spirit. And although all of those things were present at the ceremony, the sudden onslaught of weepiness was something altogether different, and I'm still piecing together just why our little Colorado Springs/Manitou Springs Civil Unions Celebration rendered me totally, irrevocably a mess. At this moment, I can think of three reasons this week's ceremonies hit me so hard.

First, LGBTQ relationships inherently fall outside the "traditional" definition of "marriage." Invisible and sometimes insidious ideas about gender roles are abandoned at the altar as two people meet each other as true equals. Many feminist men and women I know, as well as many anti-feminist hetero couples, still argue about who does the dishes...and I'm sure that happens in LGBTQ relationships as well.

But more often than not, those involved in LGBTQ relationships are starting from an emotional

space that has no roadmap, implicit or otherwise. They are charting the territory of division of labor, financial obligations, childcare, religion, and more without the benefit (or detriment) of nebulous and often damaging societal feedback about who, exactly, should do what. There's something beautiful and courageous about embarking on this journey, period. Double that for LGBTQ couples.

Second, that night I was overcome by a sense of guilt. As an ostensibly "straight ally," state-sanctioned and legally recognized commitment has always been available to me. It's available to teenagers and drunken celebrities. You apply for a license, pay the fee and off you go – holy blissful matrimony. But for the people in the room who were exchanging vows, it was almost a novelty, something so brand-new and shiny that they almost forget that it's not quite the real thing.

These loving, committed couples deserve better than decades of waiting, and I couldn't suspend, not even for a moment, my awareness of my own privilege and the suffering the LGBTQ community has endured to even get this far, not to mention the human obstacles they've had to surmount to arrive here, at the halfway point. Look at Jason Collins, who had to emotionally eviscerate himself on the national stage, expose all his wounds and deal with the backlash of intolerant vitriol with all the world watching. Again, ask anyone who knows me well: there is little that unsettles me more than human beings who require other human beings to "bleed and beg" before granting them basic civil rights.

Which brings me to the third reason. I was acutely aware – at this week's ceremonies more than ever – that "civil unions" are no permanent substitution to full marriage equality, nor is the "love the sinner hate the sin" philosophy a satisfying alternative to just plain love.

I'm mostly a realist. I believe in incremental change, appealing to hearts and minds, and all the other good stuff that makes progress possible. What's more, as you've certainly surmised by now, I believe that LGBTQ couples deserve that full marriage equality, and that civil unions is an important milestone on our journey.

But here's what else: I believe that *we need these LGBTQ couples more than they need us. I'm dismayed when others cannot see this.*

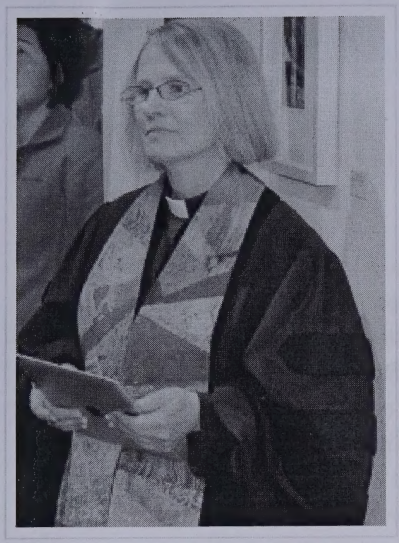
By complete accident, I've been reading a lot about the institution of marriage lately. Elizabeth Gilbert's *Committed* and Michael J. Klarman's *From the Closet to the Altar* currently populate my bedside table, thanks to the local library branch. Everything I'm reading points to something that many of us – from the most conservative to the most liberal – already know instinctively: the institution of marriage is failing. It is failing to persevere, it is failing to attract adherents, it is failing to capture the increasing complexity of familial structure. More people are getting divorced, and more people are saying "thanks but no thanks" to marriage in the first place. That's the one hand.

On the other hand, there are these loving couples, some of whom have waited decades to solidify their commitment to one another, who are desperate to enter into this contract, warts and all. Forgive me for saying so, but these are *exactly* the people we want to extend an invitation to: they will elevate the sanctity of the institution by wanting to be there in the first place and staying there in the second.

As founder and president for the Institute of American Values, David Blankenhorn, thoughtfully expressed on a recent episode of NPR's On Being:

"You know, we're in this funny situation. We've got, what, 2 or 3 percent of the population, a tiny number of Americans, who are sincerely saying let us in this institution. This means everything to us. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Americans are exiting the institution quickly. If you go to Middle America now, blue-collar America, working-class America, you will find marriage in shambles.

"So it's weird. It's like the people that want in, we say no, and the people that are already in like we are just rushing out. And I was their Mr. Anti-Gay Marriage. How is this helping strengthen what really matters to me? And the answer is, it wasn't, it wasn't. If fighting gay marriage was going to get heteros to recommit to the institution, we would have seen a sign by now, I think."



Not unlike Mr. Blankenhorn and the thousands of activists who fought for these civil unions I witnessed this week, I may be a realist in some ways. In other ways, I'm a complete idealist. I believe that we will get to full equality and that the beauty and majesty of marriage will prevail and benefit all of us – that the question is not if but when.

So maybe a part of me was crying for a fourth reason: for the road we have yet to travel and the treasure at the end of that road. For the people who walk with us, ahead of us, and behind us in this journey. And for the destination: love and commitment.

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4 THOUGHTS ON "DESTINATION: LOVE"

Susan Garsoe
on **May 15, 2013 at 1:50 pm** said:

Dear Kristy,
Thank you for this beautiful essay.
It's wrenching to think about our friends and neighbors who are denied the walk through the door into the messy and lively room of matrimony.

susan garsoe

Cindy Dilks
on **May 15, 2013 at 5:51 pm** said:

Kristy:
Thank you for sharing your thoughts about Civil Unions. It is nice that Colorado got their head out of the dark ages, to realize that there are many of us, who have made their Civil Unions with each other without family or govt. support. However, there are some benefits for people not to be legally married these days. As much as I hate to see the govt. get all of my partner's SSI benefits, there is the health issue of Dementia, where people who are not legally married, can get their partner's Long Term Care Insurance to pay them to take care of their loved one. I count myself as one of the lucky ones, who found her soul mate early, only to be robbed of a long future together because of her Frontotemporal Dementia. We have not been promised years, but moments with each other, enjoying each breath with the knowledge that God is up there crying for our society, for forgetting that we are all in this together, and that human kindness can be shared no matter what the race, color, sex, creed, etc. of the people. Thank you for sharing your heart with "the people" of Colorado Springs.

Lucky Stoller
on **May 17, 2013 at 8:09 am** said:

I love this article, Kristy, it expresses everything I feel about this issue. I've been married three times and divorced three times. No gay people were involved. The failure of my three marriages was totally the responsibility of myself and the husbands involved. On the other hand my mirror image best friend has been with her wife happily for over 25 years. They deserve the 1100+ legal rights that go with marriage as do the millions of GLBTIQ people and couples who are really taking it seriously. They deserve to raise tomorrow's children at least as much as I did. There is nothing stopping marriage equality but old ideas and I will rejoice when it happens.